

‘A driver of political violence’: how the breakneck AI boom is fueling anti-tech extremism

**Backlash against AI is taking an extremist turn, following in
the footsteps of earlier techno-pessimist militants**

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Residents put up a sign to oppose a proposed datacenter in Tonganoxie, Kansas, on 16 April 2026. Photograph: Michael Siluk/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

When a 20-year-old man from Texas was arrested earlier this year for allegedly trying to burn down OpenAI’s headquarters and Sam Altman’s house, authorities found an anti-AI manifesto alongside his lighter and a jug of kerosene. It was one of a spate of attacks that has caused alarm among researchers, the tech industry and law enforcement about the rise of anti-tech extremism.

In April, an Italian “nature pilled” Instagram influencer was arrested in Rome and charged with plotting a series of anti-tech attacks that took inspiration from Ted “The Unabomber” Kaczynski. Two self-described “ecofascists” that carried out a deadly anti-Muslim attack on a mosque in San Diego last month also cited “AI slop” and JD Vance’s ties to Palantir as motivations for their violence in their manifesto. An Indianapolis city councilor woke up earlier this year to gunshots being fired into his home before finding a note that read “NO DATA CENTERS”.



Investigators examine the scene outside the home of Indianapolis city-county councilor Ron Gibson on 6 April 2026. Photograph: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar/USA Today Network via Reuters

The growing public backlash to the tech industry’s rapid rollout of artificial intelligence has taken many, mostly-non violent forms such as local communities organizing against datacenters and political candidates promising increased oversight. Yet at the fringes, researchers say grievances against the AI industry and its leaders are animating old violent extremist movements and fomenting new ones.

“AI is becoming this driver of political violence, and that’s a very new phenomenon,” said Jordyn Abrams, a researcher at the Program on Extremism at George Washington University.

While much of the early public discussion around generative AI and extremism focused on how malign actors like terrorist groups could misuse products such as ChatGPT for propaganda purposes or plotting attacks, there is more recent attention given to how the AI industry as a whole can radicalize people. What motivates someone to extremist violence might not be a conversation with a chatbot, researchers say, but the society-wide disruption, narrative of existential threat and lack of accountability that has come with the AI boom.

In the same way that AI has come to pervade many facets of modern life, the technology has also filtered into the way that extremists think about the world. Whether it is violent anti-government groups opposing mass surveillance, ecofascists with environmental grievances, neo-Nazi accelerationists bent on collapsing critical tech infrastructure or the man who allegedly targeted Altman’s house worried about superpowerful artificial intelligence destroying humanity, AI has become a fixation across the extremist spectrum.

“It really transcends these left-right dichotomies,” said Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, an associate professor at the Royal Military College of Canada. “We’re seeing a lot of different groups, a lot of different ideologies being framed through a lens of anti-AI.”

‘There isn’t time for people to build resilience’

The modern anti-tech movement has a long lineage. Periods of technological change are historically accompanied by backlash from the people most affected, with researchers often pointing to the early 19th-century luddite rebellion of British textile workers smashing automated knitting machines as they demanded more labor rights. The next 200 years brought waves of violent labor disputes and political violence that accompanied tech’s market disruptions, uneven accumulation of wealth and disenfranchisement of workers.

In the 1990s, there was cultural pushback against the rise of the personal computer and the fear of how it would disrupt society. Common complaints included fears of replacing human workers, environmental harm and crumbling healthy social structures.

“Haven’t you heard? It wants your job. It peddles you smut. It corrupts your kids. It’s cold, sterile, inhuman. Suddenly, it’s okay to hate your computer,” read a New York Magazine cover story from 1995 on the “New Luddites”.

The same year as New York Magazine ran its cover story, the Washington Post and the New York Times published the Unabomber’s anti-tech manifesto, a 35,000-word screed against industrial society that has proliferated online in the years since and become the closest thing that anti-tech extremism has to a foundational text.

What separates anti-AI extremism from these previous waves of tech backlash, researchers say, is partly the speed and scale of how AI is bringing about economic, social and political change.

“Not only are these whole-of-society changes and not only are they really disruptive, they’re happening really quickly,” Veilleux-Lepage said. “There isn’t time for people to build resilience or to inoculate themselves from these changes.”

The AI industry’s longstanding talking points – that the technology will revolutionize the world, if not end it – also lend themselves to a radicalizing narrative that AI poses an existential threat and must be stopped at all costs. When Veilleux-LePage gives talks to policymakers about anti-tech extremism, one of his slides simply features a series of quotes from CEOs.

“In order to radicalize people, you don’t actually need to have theorists or ideologues that are calling people to violence against AI, because the tech CEOs are doing a pretty good case,” Veilleux-LePage said.

‘I expect some really bad stuff to happen’

Altman has often framed the changes AI will bring as something that may be difficult, but ultimately positive – above all, he describes the change as inevitable.

“I expect some really bad stuff to happen because of the technology which also has happened with previous technologies,” Altman said on the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz’s podcast last year.

While tech CEOs are publicly optimistic about the resilience of society and the change that AI will bring about, it is also clear that they are privately concerned with the threat of political violence. Spending on personal security for executives has ballooned over the past five years amid incidents such as the killing of the United-Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson, while tech leaders such as Elon Musk now pour millions into their own protection. SpaceX revealed in its IPO filing earlier this year that it paid \$4m last year to Musk’s private security firm, double what it had spent only two years before.

There are signs over the past year that the AI industry is shifting its rhetoric as it grapples with widespread public distrust. Altman claimed last month that AI would probably not lead to the “jobs apocalypse” that he once discussed, even as companies like Meta lay off tens of thousands of workers. OpenAI and Anthropic have meanwhile both announced funds and thinktanks this year aimed at helping civil institutions adapt to AI, with OpenAI’s non-profit organization committing \$250m to grants for programs that help workers navigate AI upheaval.



Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and owner of X, is among tech bosses upping private security. Photograph: Tom Williams/CQ-Roll Call, Inc/Getty Images

Major AI firms are hiring national security, intelligence and weapons experts to monitor threats and misuse of their technology, including some with a background in extremism and counter-terrorism research. OpenAI's head of intelligence previously worked as one of the foremost academic experts on the Islamic State and wrote a book on the group's belief that it was bringing about the apocalypse. OpenAI and Anthropic did not respond to requests for interviews with their intelligence or security experts.

No nonviolent recourse



A demonstrator wearing a 'Stop The AI Race' T-shirt outside the federal court in Oakland, California. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

The closing off of legitimate avenues to address public opposition to AI, as well as the feeling that the technology is being forced upon society, is creating what researchers describe as a gap in accountability that can further incentivize terrorism and political violence.

Donald Trump, in alignment with tech leaders, issued an executive order last year attempting to block any state-level legislation that would rein in AI development and has said that nothing will slow down the US in the global AI race. Tech billionaires

are also pouring millions of dollars into lobbying and political spending in an attempt to prevent regulation of AI.

“When authorities are too busy, or just don’t care enough, to regulate and take action, then people affected are going to take action,” said Mauro Lubrano, a lecturer at the University of Bath and author of *Stop the Machines: The Rise of Anti-Technology Extremism*.

Federal law enforcement documents acquired by Wired and the Intercept show that US authorities are increasingly monitoring anti-tech movements, while authorities have declared they will aggressively prosecute violent attacks. Following the attempted arson at Altman’s house earlier this year, authorities vowed that “the FBI will not tolerate threats against our nation’s innovation leaders”.

Yet researchers warn that authorities risk conflating the nationwide protests and calls for increased regulation of AI with more fringe, anti-tech extremist views, which is both inaccurate and counterproductive. Programs aimed at mass surveillance and attempts to silence nonviolent anti-AI movements will inevitably backfire, Lubrano says, further pushing people to the violent fringes if they feel their legitimate grievances aren’t being addressed.

“We have this opportunity to be proactive in this while avoiding mistakes that we’ve made in the past when responding to other forms of extremism,” Lubrano said. “Something tells me that we’re not off to a great start”.

The Ted K Archive

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